

129. THEOLOGY:  
*Asian American*

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DAVID HIRANO

*David Hirano (b. 1935) is a Japanese American UCC minister who graduated from Andover Newton Theological School and the School of Theology at Claremont, California. Raised as a Baptist he served in Baptist churches and on the national staff for the American Baptist Churches (1960–74). He was pastor of the Nuuanu Congregational UCC in Honolulu, Hawaii (1974–86), Christ United Church of Christ, Chicago (1987–90), conference minister of the Connecticut Conference UCC (1991–94), and executive vice-president of the United Church Board for World Ministries (1994–99). His article “Theology among Asian Americans in the United Church of Christ” was published during the first year of Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ (the theological journal started by UCC seminaries in 1985). Hirano admits that although it is very difficult to make theological generalizations, it is possible to describe common themes that enrich the faith of Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans.*

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SOURCE: David Hirano, excerpt from “Theology among Asian Americans in the United Church of Christ,” *Prism* (Fall 1986): 71–74.

## Theology among Asian Americans

. . . Asian American theology is born out of a struggle between the culture of ancestry and the culture of America. The struggle is between openness and triumphalism; family and individualism; weakness and strength. These are parts of the conflict that comes from the struggle between the culture of ancestors and the culture of America.

Most Asian religions are accepting of other religions. In an inurnment of the ashes of a young man at the tomb where the cremains were laid to rest, after the Protestant service was read, one of the family members put a rosary around the urn, then when the urn was put into the tomb, incense was passed out and each family member, whatever his or her religion, offered the incense. Here in a microcosm were seen three different ways of honoring the eternal. Such is the Asian way.

In Japanese culture one can be married by a Shinto or Christian minister and buried Buddhist. It is not unusual to find in the same household a butsudan (Buddhist altar), a kami dana (a Shinto god shelf), and a crucifix. A visit to Hawaii shows the ways in which Japanese have tended to syncretize religions: the Church of World Messianity, the Church of Perfect Liberty, and Seicho no ie are examples of Japanese religions which have taken parts of the major religions of the world and each made a religion of its own.

When caught in the struggle between triumphalism and openness, some Asian Americans say with the dominant culture, "Christ is the only way." The author of this article believes in Jesus Christ as the way for him and, while affirming the Trinity, is open to the idea that the Eternal can manifest Himself/Herself in any way that the Eternal may choose.

The serious student of Christianity and Japanese Buddhism discovers many similarities. William Mensendiek, a missionary of the United Church Board for World Ministries in Japan, writes as follows: "About a thousand years ago, the Empress Komyo, in search of enlightenment, became a Buddhist nun. In those days the only place for the poor to bathe, except for rivers and hot springs, was at the temple which is where public baths here began. Her training included bathing one thousand beggars who could not do it by themselves. After helping 999 she saw that the next one was a leper. By then she had learned that the suffering of others was her own. So she didn't hesitate. That leper was the Buddha! Nirvana was achieved."<sup>1</sup>

That story can remind the reader of the saying of Jesus: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

These similarities, as well as differences, have led the author to engage in a serious study of Buddhism, and through that study he has discovered a better understanding of himself. As he studied the religion of his ancestors, he began to see why he thought and behaved in certain ways. While his early Christian training stressed triumphalism, his inner being fought against it. He found a love for himself which no Euro-American theology gave him. Interestingly, through the study of Buddhism, he found a Christian God who loved and affirmed him as an Asian American.

In the conflict between triumphalism and openness the author has found liberation. In the flight from triumphalism the door of faith opened; the Eternal has been experienced in the day-to-day experiences of life; the ways of the ancestors were affirmed; and Christ has become more than the Christ of the Christian way, but the Christ who is made known in different ways to different cultures.

Another struggle, out of which Asian American theology is born, is the struggle between family and individuals. American culture has rightly stressed the individual. The Constitution of the United States makes clear that all persons have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Asian cultures, however, stress the family as being more important than the individual, and hence comes the conflict.

In a conversation between the author and a psychotherapist from Japan, the therapist told of Japanese young people who became Christians and then suffered nervous breakdowns. As he looked at the cause, it was because the young people, when adopting Christianity, had to leave their families. Religion separated the individual from the family.

In the sixteenth century St. Francis Xavier went to Japan as a missionary and made an amazing number of converts in a very short time. A study of the methods of evangelism leads one to see that St. Francis tried to convert the daimyo, the lord of a village, and with the conversion of the lord came the whole village or clan.

The family is more important to Asian American and Pacific Island cultures than the individual. Families supersede the person, and individual identity is not as important as the family.

The task, then, is to develop a meaningful theology of the family. When the Japanese settled in the Terminal Island area of Los Angeles County, they became a village similar to those found in Japan. They became a large extended family. Even though the Japanese Americans have scattered, they still maintain their ties. The plantation camps in Hawaii similarly

1. William Mensendiek, letter published for April 1986 mailing, UCC United Church Board for World Ministries, New York.

developed into large extended family systems, which take care of members at critical times in their lives.

In developing a theology of family, the author believes that the church can become that kind of extended family. The work of Margaret Swain in family clustering helps white suburban churches to become extended families. In Hawaii, where there are already a large number of extended families in churches, the question rises, how does one minister to the extended family?

The conflict between family and individual raises another question. "How does one deal with shame?" Shame is a feeling associated with groups; guilt is highly individual. Shame has to do with identity, while guilt has more to do with the violation of a rule. Although the distinctions between shame and guilt are sometimes hard to see, the feelings are different and it does not help to mix the two.

Guilt requires forgiveness of sins, while shame requires the repairing of a relationship. Guilt has to do with a crime or transgression which no one may know about; shame has to do with the "eyes of the world on me" and "losing face." While shame is a universal feeling, it is more commonly associated with Asians than with Euro-Americans.

Christianity has dealt with guilt and forgiveness. The Christian liturgy includes the confession of sins. Psychology has enabled people to deal with guilt but does not know how to deal with shame. Likewise, Christianity has not dealt with shame.

But when one begins a cursory examination of the Bible, one finds that shame is emphasized more often than guilt. Helen Merrell Lynd in *Shame and the Search for Identity*, after studying a concordance of the King James Bible, observes that guilt does not appear as often as shame.<sup>2</sup> A reading of the concordance of the Revised Standard Version shows a larger number of references to guilt but still there are more references to shame than to guilt.

Although in the English language there are few words that deal with shame, the Japanese have no word for "guilt." In fact the word "sin" in Japanese means an indiscretion and does not carry the weight of "sin" as a transgression against God's law.

Shame is the feeling of unworthiness, of missing the mark. It is a primal feeling that, as Erik Erikson says, comes in the second stage of the "development of man." He says that shame is too quickly subsumed under guilt.<sup>3</sup> Theologically, shame better describes the condition of the human

being, for shame has to do with identity. It has to do with the family of God and sin.

In the Japanese family the ultimate punishment for shaming a family was banishment. The ultimate way in which shame was resolved was through hara kiri, committing suicide. While shame is very difficult to resolve, Christianity says, "God will never turn God's back on anybody." So the Christian can be certain that God's love will be there for anybody.

In the study of shame, the author's research has discovered that those who have written books on shame have been Japanese, Germans, Jews, women, and those who deal with alcoholics. All these people know what it is to be ashamed. So for the oppressed, the poor, the unworthy, the guilty, the unloved, who feel ashamed, God's love in Christ is one of the ways in which shame may be dealt with.

Dealing with shame lifts up the importance of the group. For Christians it is the church, the community of faith, that embraces the person no matter how unworthy she or he feels. The church needs to become the extended family in which losers as well as winners are welcomed, where the sinner knows that God loves everyone. The church needs to be the community where people can come to be accepted as people and not have to be perfect, where people can be together to cry, laugh, pray, or play without being self-conscious or feeling that they are being judged. Thus the community of believers becomes an integral part of dealing with shame. The community of believers also becomes the locus in which displaced persons can find identity.

From living as a minority in America one sees the strength and power of the majority, and there is a temptation to powerlessness or to join the powerful. Much of Christianity seems to proclaim a God who comes in power and might. To live as a minority in this country is not to fall into either temptation, but to see that Christ is made known in the weakness of humans.

St. Paul writes, "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong" (1 Corinthians 4:10). Jesus ends up with twelve disciples, one of whom betrays him. Jesus is persecuted and crucified, and after the crucifixion is resurrected. In the eyes of the world Christ was a failure, but through the failure came salvation for all.

In the novels of Shusako Endo, a Roman Catholic layperson in Japan, the Christ figure is a person who is weak: Christ is seen in a sickly patient, a homely boy, or a person who is dying. Assuredly, Christ is made known in the ordinary experiences of humankind. More especially, Christ is made known in the weakness of people.

2. Helen Merrell Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 25.

3. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963), 252.

So those who live as a minority in a majority culture do not have to feel powerless or in fact to join the powerful. Though part of a small minority, the Asian American Christian when faithful to Jesus Christ will be an instrument through which Christ is made known.

Asian American theology is still in the process of conception. It is being born out of suffering and struggle, from which emerges the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord. This affirmation, while the same for all of Christendom, has a unique interpretation for the Asian American.